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SUBJECT: USG-SPONSORED DEBATE STARTS DIALOGUE ON UGANDA'S 2011
ELECTIONS

¶1. Summary: Ruling party Secretary General Amama Mbabazi and Opposition Leader in Parliament Morris Latigo participated in a debate on challenges to the electoral system in Uganda on October 30. U.S. Mission Kampala, capitalizing on interest in U.S. elections, partnered with a local think tank to sponsor the debate to encourage dialogue on electoral reform in Uganda. In what was a lively discussion, participants exchanged views on the government's failure to institutionalize the Supreme Court's electoral reform recommendations following the 2006 elections, public financing for political parties, the independence of the Electoral Commission, and the democratization process. The debate was well received, with members of Parliament, civil society, academia, and the development and diplomatic community in attendance. End Summary.

Electoral Commission Independence

¶2. A local think tank, backed by U.S. Mission public diplomacy funding, hosted a debate on "Challenges to the Electoral Systems in Africa" on October 30. The discussion focused on three issues: Electoral Commission (EC) independence, electoral reform, and campaign finance. Opposition Leader in Parliament Morris Ogenga Latigo opened the debate with an appeal to Africans to "stop deceiving themselves that the African environment somehow required a different set of rules to achieve democracy." He said that the fundamentals for democracy were very clear and that reforms are meaningless unless politics change. Latigo suggested that there was a need to "change the mindset" of African leaders who cling to power under the notion that it is only they who can govern. Turning to Uganda specifically, he said that the Electoral Commission (EC) did not deliver free and fair elections in 2001 or 2006, and that the Supreme Court rulings confirmed this. The Supreme Court ruling cited fundamental problems in the 2006 elections which included involvement of the security forces in elections, intimidation, violence, lack of voter education, partisan conduct of electoral officials, and disenfranchisement of voters. He stressed the need to reconstitute the EC to include representation from the opposition and said that the body should be free of state intervention.

¶3. Security Minister and National Resistance Movement (NRM) Secretary General Amama Mbabazi acknowledged Latigo's concerns that additional reforms were needed to address electoral irregularities that occurred in 2006, but disagreed that the EC itself required reform. He said that the EC had made considerable progress towards ensuring free and fair elections. Mbabazi rejected the idea of establishing a multiparty EC, arguing that the "integrity and independence" of the electoral body was more important than the political leanings of its members. He cited the appointment of High Court Justice Joseph Mulenga, a former Chairman of the Democratic Party (DP), and Supreme Court Judge George Kanyeihamba, an NRM member, as examples of individuals with dissenting philosophies who performed their professional duties. Justice Kanyeihamba, who was seated in the audience, used Mbabazi's opening to express his concern over the government's failure to act on the Supreme Court recommendations for electoral reform.

Areas for Electoral Reform

¶4. Latigo argued that a number of changes are needed in the

electoral process and that the EC should draw lessons from Rwanda. He explained that in Rwanda, electoral officials set up polling stations in schools or open places as opposed to Uganda, where some stations are located in isolated bush areas where it is difficult to verify that proper procedures are followed. He urged the EC to establish a delivery schedule for election materials to avoid confusion at polling centers on election day. Mbabazi again noted Latigo's concerns, but reminded him that considerable progress towards improving the electoral system had been made under the NRM government. He said that the government had, for example, established preset election dates and times, instituted a more secure ballot box, changed the ballot counting process, and passed electoral provisions allowing 90 days for any dispute to be resolved before the swearing in of the President. Mbabazi said that the EC was working on legal amendments to take into account the Supreme Court's recommendations. However, he reminded Latigo that "just because the government does not accept your proposal does not mean that it did not weigh it appropriately." On presidential term limits, Mbabazi said limiting the President to two terms was "undemocratic" and African democracies were "too immature" to handle frequent, sometimes violent elections.

Campaign Financing Necessary

15. Mbabazi acknowledged that campaign financing was critical in the electoral process. He said the state should fund all candidates and the law should limit foreign resources to avoid external interference or undue influence. Latigo expressed concern that the current government could not or would not fund opposition political parties fairly. He challenged the government to reveal the NRM's accountability on the 2006 election. He noted that the FDC accounted for funds it used in the 2006 elections, but the NRM party had not. He said the bill on campaign financing currently before Parliament failed to address the issue of accountability. Latigo supported the idea of foreign funding of political parties and agreed that the parties must be transparent and accountable about sources of funding.

Other Issues of Concern

16. Latigo criticized the military's role in the electoral process and said that army representatives in Parliament "always side with the NRM party" and should be removed, calling their presence undemocratic. Audience members during the question and answer portion of the debate pressed Mbabazi on late enactment of electoral laws and subsequent late release of electoral funding in previous elections. They accused the government of restricting the opposition's ability to use public media for debate on political issues and curtailing public assembly rights. Mbabazi responded that there had been much more political freedom and expansion of the independent media under the NRM. One participant called for proportional representation to reduce the size of parliament.

Comment

17. We were pleased with the tone of the discussion set by Mbabazi and Latigo. They focused on the topics of debate, presented their points of view, and provided strong counterpoints. The discussion helped achieve several of post's objectives. First, public discussion of the modalities of Uganda's elections in order to enable a free and fair poll is critical to get buy-in from all parties. Second, the neutral venue allowed potentially charged political issues to be discussed with the public in a non-political venue. Third, if continued, these discussions could help foster a tone that, if maintained into the elections, may allow electoral issues to be resolved in a non-violent manner. Finally, the public discussion hopefully will jumpstart government preparations for the next elections, which according to many observers need to start now to ensure a credible poll in 2011. We are getting requests to support additional debates in hopes of maintaining momentum for dialogue on issues of national interest.

